PATTERNS OF POWER

What Looks Like Osmosis

How Arrangements Appear to Spread Across the World as if by Some Force in the Air, When What Actually Travels Is a Proven Template That Served the Powerful Who Chose to Copy It, Why Functioning Hierarchies Are Changed by Elites and Not by a Common Man Who Can Break but Cannot Build, and Why There Is No Mystical Mover Behind Structural Change — Only People Deciding Inside Their Positions With the Materials at Hand

Thomas J. Bryan

with Claude (Anthropic)

2026

A Note on This Collaboration

This study is one product of an ongoing collaboration, and the division of labour behind it is real enough to be worth stating, because neither half would have produced the work alone. The framework is Thomas J. Bryan's, and so is the conviction this volume defends: that there is no mystical force behind structural change — no spirit of the age, no arc of history, no idea spreading by its own power — only people making decisions inside their structural positions with the materials at hand. He is against, in particular, two familiar stories: the one that blames the fall of an order on the moral decadence of the common man, and the one that waits for the common man to rise and remake the order from below. His claim, offered as ever as a pattern he notices rather than a doctrine he asserts, is that a functioning hierarchy is changed by elites, not by the common man, who can break but cannot build; that the elites are no unified class but contending factions, each bound by the belief that legitimates it and each running on position logic; that a faction in need of a weapon copies an arrangement it has seen another apex make work; and that the ideas which spread are the ones useful to the powerful who adopt them, copied as tools, so that what looks from a distance like the osmosis of an idea is, up close, the sum of those choices. The research, the verification of every load-bearing date, figure, and named scholar against the literature, and the prose are Claude's (Anthropic), developed in the same dialogue. The volume is built around the demonstration effect as its engine, with the structural theory of revolution supplying the reason it is not the common man, and it ends, like its companions, in a recognition rather than a remedy.

The Argument in Eight Parts

PART I · The Thing That Looks Like Osmosis How the spread of an arrangement across the world comes to look like the working of a force in the air, why the mind reaches for a mystical mover to explain it, and the claim this volume defends — that there is no such force, only people in positions copying what they have seen work

PART II · Why It Is Not the Common Man The structural reason a functioning hierarchy is not overthrown from below, the scholar who showed that revolutions are not willed but occur when the state has already broken at the top, and the precise sense in which the many are the fuel of change and never its architect

PART III · The Factions That Go Looking Why the elites who actually drive change are not one unified bloc but a contending set of factions, each bound by the belief that justifies it, and how a faction out of power or hemmed in by a superior comes to be hunting for a new arrangement it can use

PART IV · The Demonstration Effect How a successful arrangement in one place becomes a proven template that others copy, the scholars who gave this copying its name and showed it operates under uncertainty and for legitimacy rather than for proven results, and why a working model adds new furniture to the room of how elites can rule

PART V · The Prince Who Saw It Could Be Done A case in which a religious idea is said to have swept a continent, the material interests and demonstrated possibilities that actually carried it from prince to prince, and the older imperial template that every claimant copied because it was the proven way to be a king

PART VI · Ideas That Pay, Not Ideas That Are True The selection that decides which ideas travel, the historians who refused to treat ideas as free-floating things with lives of their own, and the necessary qualification — that an idea, once adopted for its use, becomes real furniture and acts back on the people who installed it

PART VII · The Osmosis That Was Not How the appearance of a self-spreading idea is the same inference error as the cabal and the conscious class, why the spread of an arrangement carries the fingerprint of the interests it served rather than the smooth front of a natural force, and what the cases that did not spread reveal

PART VIII · People, Deciding The whole account gathered, why seeing structural change as made of choices rather than carried by a force is the recognition the volume offers in place of a prescription, and a last word on the hands beneath the tide

Preface

This volume can be read by someone who has met neither the framework it belongs to nor any companion study. Every term is defined where it first appears; every case is described rather than merely named; and where it draws on a particular scholar, it says who they were and what they argued.

Its subject is how arrangements change and spread, and it is written against a powerful illusion. Watch the forms of rule travel across the map of history — the republic, the written constitution, the nation-state, the very idea of elections — and it is hard not to see a tide: an idea whose time has come, a spirit of the age, a force in the air carrying the form from shore to shore. This volume argues that the tide is an illusion of distance. What looks, from far enough away, like an idea diffusing through the membrane of the world by its own power is, seen up close, always the same thing: particular people, in particular positions, copying what they have seen work.

It defends two plain claims in place of the mystical one. The first concerns who changes a functioning order: not the common man, who does not and structurally cannot overthrow an intact hierarchy with an organised army and trained officers, but elites — themselves no unified bloc but contending factions, each bound by the belief that legitimates it — one of whom adopts a new arrangement as a weapon and, if it wins, installs it. The second concerns which ideas travel: not the true ones but the useful ones, the arrangements that served the powerful who copied them. The engine of the spread is the demonstration effect — a faction in need of a weapon copies a template it has seen another apex make work — which the students of organisations call mimetic isomorphism; and the reason it is elites and not the common man is the structural theory of revolution, which holds that functioning states fall when they break at the top, the many pouring through the breach as the fuel of a transformation they cannot themselves design.

It keeps the discipline of its companions. It holds the strongest version of the opposing case; it qualifies itself where it would otherwise slide into a crudeness as false as the idealism it corrects, granting that an idea, once adopted for its use, becomes real furniture that acts back on those who installed it; and it ends not in a remedy but in a recognition — that there is no force carrying history anywhere, only people deciding inside their positions — because to name the force that drives history is already to claim a destination, which is the oldest tell of a doctrine that has stopped looking at the world.

PART I

The Thing That Looks Like Osmosis

How the spread of an arrangement across the world comes to look like the working of a force in the air, why the mind reaches for a mystical mover to explain it, and the claim this volume defends — that there is no such force, only people in positions copying what they have seen work

I. The Appearance of a Tide

Watch the forms of rule spread across the map of history and it is hard not to see a tide. A way of organising power appears in one place and then, as if carried on the air, turns up in another and another — the republic, the written constitution, the nation-state, the bureaucratic ministry, the very idea of elections — until what began as one arrangement in one country has become the common furniture of half the world. Observers reach, almost helplessly, for the language of natural force to describe it. They speak of an idea whose time has come, of the spirit of the age, of the arc of history bending, of progress, of the inevitable direction of things. The spread looks like osmosis: a concentration of something high in one vessel, seeping through the membrane of borders and centuries until it has equalised across them all, drawn by a gradient no one created and no one controls.

This volume is an argument that the tide is an illusion of distance, and that there is no force in the air. What looks, from far enough away, like an idea diffusing through the membrane of the world by its own power is, seen up close, always the same thing: particular people, in particular positions, looking at what has worked elsewhere, judging that it would serve them, and choosing to copy it. The membrane is made of decisions. The gradient is made of interests. There is no osmosis. There are only hands.

II. Why the Mind Reaches for a Mover

The reach for a mystical mover is not stupidity; it is the natural response of a mind confronted with a large, coherent pattern whose makers it cannot see. Faced with order it cannot trace to an orderer, the mind supplies one — and where the order is the spread of an idea, the orderer it supplies is the idea itself, granted a kind of agency, a momentum, a will to propagate. This is the same error this project has met before in other guises: the error of inferring a hidden coordinator from a coordinated-looking result, whether the coordinator imagined is a secret cabal, or a class that has become conscious of itself and acts, or — here — a Spirit of history moving its pieces toward a destination. In every case the inference runs from the pattern to a single mover behind it, and in every case the mover is a fiction covering a process

that was really made of many separate, uncoordinated, interested choices. The osmosis is the mover the mind invents because it cannot, from where it stands, see the choosing.

III. What This Volume Claims

Stripped of the mystical mover, the spread of arrangements resolves into two plain claims, and the volume defends both. The first concerns who changes a functioning order: not the common man, who does not and structurally cannot overthrow an intact hierarchy with an organised army and trained officers, but the elites — themselves no unified bloc but a contending set of factions, each bound by the belief that legitimates it and each running its own logic of position — one of whom adopts a new arrangement as a weapon in its struggle and, if it wins, installs it. The second concerns which ideas travel: not the true ones, or the noble ones, or the ones whose time has come, but the useful ones — the arrangements that served the powerful who took them up, copied for what they did rather than received for what they were.

And the volume keeps the discipline that the whole project keeps. It holds its own account as tested rather than revealed, watches for where it strains, and refuses the comfort of a mystical explanation precisely because a mystical explanation can never be tested against anything — a Spirit of history that explains every spread and every stall alike explains nothing. The wager throughout is the plainest one available: that structural change, like everything else in this body of work, is people making decisions inside their structural positions with the materials at hand, and that the apparent osmosis is only the name we give the process when we are standing too far away to see that it is made of choices.

PART II

Why It Is Not the Common Man

The structural reason a functioning hierarchy is not overthrown from below, the scholar who showed that revolutions are not willed but occur when the state has already broken at the top, and the precise sense in which the many are the fuel of change and never its architect

I. The Functioning State Does Not Fall From Below

The first thing to clear away is the romantic picture in which the common man, pressed far enough, rises and overthrows the order that oppresses him. It is a picture that serves two opposite politics — the conservative who fears the mob and the radical who waits for it — and it is, as a description of how functioning hierarchies actually fall, very largely wrong. A hierarchy that is still working — that still commands an organised army with a trained officer corps, still collects its revenue, still holds the loyalty of the men who hold the weapons — is not overthrown by a rising from below, because the rising meets the floor of force intact and is crushed by it. The many may be miserable, may be furious, may be right; none of that is sufficient, because fury is not organisation and misery is not an army. The order falls, when it falls, by a different route.

II. Revolutions Are Not Willed

The route was mapped by the sociologist Theda Skocpol, in a comparative study of the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions that remains the most influential modern account of how such transformations happen. Her finding overturned the voluntarist picture. Social revolutions, she argued, cannot be explained by the will of the masses or the ideology of the revolutionaries or the organising of a vanguard alone; they occur when a state breaks down at the top — typically under the combined pressure of military competition and defeat from abroad and fiscal crisis at home, with the ruling class itself divided and unable to act — and when that breakdown coincides with the capacity of the lower classes, usually the peasantry, to revolt. The state cracks first, from pressures largely external and structural; only then does mass action pour through the crack and become revolutionary. Revolutions, in the formulation her work is remembered by, are not willed; they occur when the structures align. The masses do not bring down a functioning state. They surge through the breach in a state that has already broken.

This is the structural answer to both stories the present account rejects. It answers the tale of moral decline — the claim that an order falls because the people have grown decadent and lost their virtue — by showing that the decline is structural, a matter of military and fiscal pressure and elite division, not of

popular character. And it answers the romantic's vigil for the rising of the people by showing that the rising, absent a prior breakdown at the top, breaks against the floor of force and achieves nothing but its own martyrs.

III. Fuel, Not Architect

But the honest account must not overstate, and Skocpol herself does not: the many are not nothing. Her revolutions require the peasant revolt as a genuine component; the breach at the top becomes a revolution only because the mass pours through it, and a state can break at the top and simply be reorganised by another set of elites with no transformation below if the mass does not move. So the precise role of the common man is real but bounded: he is the fuel and the force, the energy that a breakdown releases and that contending elites strive to harness, and without him many a transformation would not catch. What he is not, and structurally cannot be, is the architect. To build the new arrangement that replaces the old requires what a mass does not possess — the organisation, the trained administrators, the officer corps, the legitimating doctrine, the craft of actually running a complex society — and these are elite possessions. This is why even a rising that succeeds is captured: the vacuum it opens is filled not by the crowd that opened it but by whatever organised minority can supply the craft of rule, so that the many who broke the old order find themselves, soon enough, beneath a new one they did not design. The common man can break. He cannot build. And structural change is built, by people with the materials to build it, which the common man, for all his indispensable force, does not have.

PART III

The Factions That Go Looking

Why the elites who actually drive change are not one unified bloc but a contending set of factions, each bound by the belief that justifies it, and how a faction out of power or hemmed in by a superior comes to be hunting for a new arrangement it can use

I. Not One Will, but Many

If the architects of structural change are elites, it would be a mistake to picture them as a single unified will calmly redesigning the order to suit a shared interest. They are nothing so coherent. The people at the top of an order are a contending set of factions — families, parties, branches of the apparatus, regional powers, claimants to the same few commanding seats — locked in a perpetual struggle among themselves over who shall hold what. And each faction is bound, as tightly as any subject, by the belief that legitimates its power: the dynasty that rules by the Mandate cannot simply discard the Mandate; the party that rules in the name of a doctrine cannot be seen to betray the doctrine; the office-holder under a constitution derives his authority from the constitution and is lost without it. The elite runs on position logic exactly as the base does — each faction defending and seeking to enlarge its position, each constrained by the legitimating belief it cannot abandon without forfeiting the very authority it fights to hold.

II. The Hunger of the Faction Out of Power

This contention is the engine that drives elites to go looking for new arrangements, because a faction that is losing the struggle, or one that chafes under a superior it cannot otherwise throw off, is a faction in need of a weapon. The incumbent who holds the seats is generally content with the arrangement that put him there; it is the one who is shut out, or held down, who has reason to want the furniture of the order changed — because a change in the rules of legitimacy is a change in who may rule, and a faction blocked under the present rules may find an opening under different ones. A prince chafing under a pope and an emperor, a provincial governor under a distant throne, an excluded party under an entrenched establishment: each of these is a positioned actor with a concrete motive to find some new legitimating arrangement that would loosen the grip of the power above it and license its own rise. The factional fight is the demand side of the spread of arrangements. The hemmed-in faction is the customer, hunting for a tool.

III. What It Is Hunting For

And what such a faction hunts for is not truth and not beauty but utility — an arrangement that would actually serve its position in the struggle. It wants a way to legitimate a power it does not yet securely hold, or to throw off a superior, or to bind its rivals, or to mobilise a resource it cannot otherwise reach. It is, in other words, in exactly the frame of mind in which one looks around at what others have done and asks not "is this right?" but "would this work for me?" — the frame of mind of the buyer surveying the market, the manager under pressure scanning for a model, the claimant casting about for a precedent that would license his claim. This is the condition that makes the demonstration effect work, and it is why the spread of arrangements is so much a matter of elites watching elites. The faction that needs a tool is watching the other apexes to see what tools exist and which of them have been shown to work — and that watching, multiplied across a field of contending elites all hunting for advantage, is the whole of what looks, from a distance, like an idea spreading by its own power.

PART IV

The Demonstration Effect

How a successful arrangement in one place becomes a proven template that others copy, the scholars who gave this copying its name and showed it operates under uncertainty and for legitimacy rather than for proven results, and why a working model adds new furniture to the room of how elites can rule

I. Seeing That It Can Be Done

The thing a hunting faction is most powerfully moved by is a demonstration — the sight of some other apex having actually done the thing and survived. An arrangement that exists only as a proposal, however elegant, is a risk; an arrangement that some prince or party or state has already adopted, and under which it visibly holds power, is a proven template, and the difference between the two is enormous to a positioned actor weighing whether to stake his position on a change. The successful example does two things at once. It dissolves the doubt that the thing is possible — it shows that it can be done, that a ruler can break this way or legitimate himself that way and not immediately fall — and it supplies a worked model to copy rather than a problem to solve from scratch. A working arrangement somewhere adds, as it were, a new piece of furniture to the room of what an elite may do: an option that was not previously on the menu of conceivable moves is now on it, demonstrated, available to be taken up by anyone whose position it would serve.

II. The Name for the Copying

This copying has been studied closely, under the name the sociologists Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell gave it: mimetic isomorphism, the process by which organisations come to resemble one another by imitation. Their finding, drawn from the study of firms and agencies but general in its logic, is precise on the conditions. Organisations copy one another most under uncertainty — when their situation is difficult and the right course is unclear — and what they copy is the peer they perceive as successful or legitimate, turning to it as a template rather than reasoning out a solution of their own. And the copying, they observed, is driven by the search for legitimacy and standing rather than by demonstrated performance: an arrangement is adopted because it is the thing successful peers are seen to have, often regardless of whether it can be shown actually to work better. Their own literature offers a case that could stand for the whole of this volume's theme — the modernising Japanese state of the late nineteenth century, deliberately surveying the powers that had succeeded and copying their models, ministry and army and constitution,

not because a force in the air carried Western forms to Japan but because a hard-pressed ruling group, facing the uncertainty of a world of stronger states, judged that copying what had visibly worked was the path to survival.

III. The Mechanism Behind the Tide

Set mimetic copying beside the contending factions of the previous part and the apparent tide resolves entirely into its mechanism. A field of elites, each hunting for advantage and each watching the others, contains at any moment many positioned actors in a condition of uncertainty, looking for proven templates that would serve them. Let one apex succeed conspicuously with some arrangement, and it becomes, for all the watching others, a demonstration — a thing shown to be possible and a model ready to copy. Those whose position the arrangement would serve adopt it; those it would not, do not. Multiply this across a continent and a century and the result is the spread of the arrangement from apex to apex — not smoothly and universally, as a real osmosis would equalise a solution through a membrane, but patchily, interestedly, taken up exactly where it served the positions of those who took it and ignored exactly where it did not. The spread has the shape of the interests it served, not the shape of a force in the air, and that shape is the fingerprint of the mechanism. What diffuses is not an idea exercising its own power. It is a tool, passing from hand to hand among toolmakers, each of whom picked it up because it would do a job he needed done.

PART V

The Prince Who Saw It Could Be Done

A case in which a religious idea is said to have swept a continent, the material interests and demonstrated possibilities that actually carried it from prince to prince, and the older imperial template that every claimant copied because it was the proven way to be a king

I. Not the Truth of the Idea

The spread of the Protestant Reformation across the German lands is told, in the idealist register, as the sweep of a religious idea — Luther's doctrine, by its spiritual force, winning hearts across a continent. Bracketing entirely the question of the doctrine's truth, which is not this volume's to judge, the spread among the people who actually decided the matter — the princes — is better explained by what the break did for them than by what it taught. For a German prince, breaking with Rome was not first of all a theological act; it was a seizure of power and property. Converting to Lutheranism let a prince, in the plain historical account, take control of the religious affairs of his own territory and reclaim authority from the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope above him — and it came with a windfall, for the settlement that eventually ended the fighting let the Lutheran princes keep the lands of the Church they had seized. The idea, to the prince, was a key that unlocked both independence from his superiors and the wealth of the monasteries. It is not mysterious that such a key was widely copied.

II. Whose Realm, His Religion

The settlement that codified the new arrangement makes its character unmistakable. The Peace of Augsburg of 1555, which ended the war between the Emperor and the league of Lutheran princes, established the principle since known by the phrase cuius regio, eius religio — whose realm, his religion — granting each prince the right to set the faith of his own territory and, in doing so, reaffirming his sovereignty over it. The principle was not a statement about the soul; it was a settlement about power, a redistribution of authority over religion from the universal institutions of Pope and Emperor down to the individual territorial ruler. Once one prince had broken from Rome and kept both his throne and the seized Church lands, the break was a demonstrated possibility and a proven template — the thing had been done, it could be done, and it paid. Other princes, hemmed in by the same superiors and tempted by the same wealth, copied the move because it served their position, and the copying, prince by interested prince, is the spread that the idealist account mistakes for the diffusion of a doctrine.

III. The Template Every King Copied

The same pattern, that a proven way of being a ruler is copied by everyone who would be one, can be seen in the longest-lived legitimating arrangement in history, the Chinese Mandate of Heaven. The Mandate held that Heaven granted the right to rule to the just and withdrew it from the unworthy, so that a founder who seized the throne could claim Heaven had transferred the Mandate to him. The point, for the present argument, is that the Mandate was the proven template for being a Chinese emperor, and so every successful claimant copied it — not because its cosmology compelled belief by its truth, but because it was the demonstrated, available, working way to legitimate a seizure of power, and a founder who wished to rule reached for it as the established tool of the trade. And the template travelled outward as well, copied by the rulers of neighbouring realms who adopted the Chinese model of legitimate kingship and bureaucratic rule because it was the prestigious, proven arrangement of the great power next door. A founder claiming the Mandate, a prince breaking from Rome, a modernising state copying a foreign constitution: in each the spread is the copying of a demonstrated, useful template by a positioned actor it would serve, and in none is it the self-propelled diffusion of an idea by its own power.

PART VI

Ideas That Pay, Not Ideas That Are True

The selection that decides which ideas travel, the historians who refused to treat ideas as free-floating things with lives of their own, and the necessary qualification — that an idea, once adopted for its use, becomes real furniture and acts back on the people who installed it

I. The Filter Is Utility

If arrangements spread by being copied by positioned actors whom they serve, then there is a filter on which ideas travel at all, and the filter is not truth. An idea may be true, or noble, or elegant, and if no positioned actor finds it useful it will sit in a drawer and go nowhere; an idea may be crude or even false, and if it serves the powerful who encounter it, it will spread across a continent. What passes the filter is utility to someone with the power to adopt it — an arrangement that helps a faction legitimate itself, throw off a superior, bind a rival, or mobilise a resource. This is why the history of which ideas won is so poor a guide to which ideas were right: the winners were selected for what they did for the people in a position to install them, and being right was, at most, incidental to being useful. Ideas propose; position disposes. The graveyard of true ideas that served no one is as crowded as the throne room of useful ones that served a prince.

II. Against the Free-Floating Idea

This cuts against a long habit of writing history as though ideas were the actors — as though an idea, once born, possessed a life and a momentum of its own and went about conquering minds by its intrinsic force. The habit was challenged head-on by the historian Quentin Skinner and the school of contextual intellectual history he led, who argued that ideas are not free-floating units drifting through time but situated acts performed by particular people for particular purposes in particular circumstances. To understand why a political idea appeared and spread, on this view, one does not consult the idea's intrinsic appeal; one asks what the people who used it were doing with it — what move, in their concrete situation, deploying this idea allowed them to make. The same instinct, run from a different direction, animated the materialist tradition that followed Marx, which insisted that the ideas prevailing in an age are not the engine of the age but its superstructure, rising from and serving the arrangement of power beneath them rather than steering it. One need not accept the whole of either programme to take the shared point: an idea does not travel under its own power, because ideas have no power of their own to travel under. People carry ideas, and they carry the ones that serve them.

III. But Not Inert

Here, though, the argument must qualify itself, or it slides into a crudeness as false as the idealism it corrects. To say that the spread of an idea is selected by its utility to the powerful is not to say that ideas are inert, mere froth on the surface of interest. Once an idea has been adopted and built into the furniture of an order, it becomes real, and it acts back on the people who installed it, often in ways they did not intend and would not have chosen. It forms the next generation, who absorb it not as a tool their grandfathers picked up but as simple truth, and so come to believe what their ancestors merely used. It binds the very faction that adopted it: the prince who broke from Rome to gain his independence could not later un-break when it suited him, for his legitimacy now rested on the break; the party that seized power in the name of a doctrine became the prisoner of the doctrine it had wielded. And its words, if they are universal — as legitimating words must be, to legitimate broadly — pass out of the control of those who deployed them and into the hands of the excluded, who turn the borrowed creed back upon its borrowers and demand that it be honoured. So the correct account holds two things together: the spread of an idea is selected by its usefulness to the powerful, and the idea, once installed, is a real force with consequences of its own that can outrun and even turn against the interest that selected it. Ideas do not steer history; but they are not nothing, and the arrangement built on a borrowed idea is shaped, ever after, by the idea it borrowed.

PART VII

The Osmosis That Was Not

How the appearance of a self-spreading idea is the same inference error as the cabal and the conscious class, why the spread of an arrangement carries the fingerprint of the interests it served rather than the smooth front of a natural force, and what the cases that did not spread reveal

I. The Same Error in a Third Costume

The mystical mover behind the spread of arrangements is the same fiction this project has met twice before, wearing a third costume. Confronted with a coordinated-looking order, the suspicious mind infers a secret cabal coordinating it; confronted with the reproduction of a class society, it infers a class that has become conscious of itself and acts; and confronted with the spread of an arrangement across the world, it infers a Spirit of history, an idea with momentum, a tide of progress carrying the form from shore to shore. In all three the move is identical — from a pattern to a single hidden mover that must be producing it — and in all three the move is invalid for the same reason: the pattern is exactly what a multitude of separate, uncoordinated, interested choices produces on their own, so the pattern is no evidence of any mover behind it. The osmosis is the Spirit-of-history version of the cabal: a coordinator invented to explain a result that needed no coordinator, because it was made of many hands each reaching, independently, for what served them.

II. The Fingerprint of Interest

The decisive evidence that no force in the air is at work is the shape of the spread itself. A genuine osmosis equalises: a solution seeps through a membrane until its concentration is the same on both sides, indifferent to anything but the gradient and the barrier, smoothing toward uniformity everywhere. The spread of arrangements does nothing of the kind. It is patchy, selective, and interested — taken up exactly where it served the positions of those with the power to adopt it, refused exactly where it did not, arriving early where a hemmed-in faction needed a weapon and never arriving at all where the incumbents were content. The form that spreads carries, in the pattern of where it went and where it stalled, the fingerprint of the interests that carried it, not the smooth indifferent front of a natural force. When one studies which states adopted a constitution and which did not, which princes broke from Rome and which stayed, which neighbours copied the imperial model and which resisted it, the boundaries fall not along the lines a tide would draw but along the lines of who stood to gain. The shape of the spread is the shape of the interests, and a force in the air would have left no such fingerprint.

III. What the Stalls Reveal

The cases that did not spread are as telling as those that did, and they are the clearest refutation of the mystical account, because a Spirit of history that was truly moving the world toward some form should not have left so many places untouched for so long. Arrangements that were demonstrably available, known, and to some eyes plainly superior sat unadopted for centuries in places where no positioned actor found them useful, and were taken up elsewhere the moment they served someone with the power to install them. An idea whose time had supposedly come waited, in fact, upon a faction that needed it. The stalls and the sudden takings-up alike are explained by the same simple thing: the arrangement spread where and when it served the position of someone able to adopt it, and not otherwise. There is no need to posit a tide that mysteriously reached some shores and not others. There were only hands, reaching for tools, where the tools would do them good — and declining to reach where they would not. The osmosis that the distant eye saw was never there. There were only people, in positions, deciding.

PART VIII

People, Deciding

The whole account gathered, why seeing structural change as made of choices rather than carried by a force is the recognition the volume offers in place of a prescription, and a last word on the hands beneath the tide

I. The Whole Account

Gather the pieces. A functioning hierarchy is not overthrown from below, because a rising meets the floor of force intact and breaks against it; functioning orders fall when they break at the top, under pressures structural and external, and the many pour through the breach as the fuel of a transformation they cannot themselves design, because building a new order requires a craft of rule that is an elite possession and not a possession of the crowd. The elites who do the building are no unified bloc but a contending set of factions, each bound by the belief that legitimates it, each running its own logic of position, and a faction that is losing or hemmed in goes hunting for a new arrangement that would serve it. What it hunts for is a proven template — a thing some other apex has been seen to do and survive — and when it finds one it copies it, by the plain mechanism of imitation under uncertainty that the students of organisations call mimetic isomorphism. The arrangements that spread this way are selected not for their truth but for their usefulness to the powerful who adopt them, though once installed they become real furniture that forms the next generation and binds even the faction that borrowed them. And the spread, summed across a field of contending elites all copying what serves them, takes on from a distance the look of a tide, an idea diffusing through the membrane of the world by its own power — when up close it is always the same thing: particular people, in particular positions, copying what they have seen work.

II. What the Recognition Is, and Is Not

The volume ends, as each of its companions ends, in a recognition rather than a remedy, and here the refusal to prescribe matters more than anywhere, because the temptation this volume resists is precisely the temptation to name the force that drives history and so to claim to know where it is going. To say that structural change is carried by a Spirit, an arc, a tide, a logic of progress, is already to claim a destination — to say that history is going somewhere in particular and that one knows the somewhere — and that claim is the oldest tell of a doctrine that has stopped looking at the world and started reading it as the confirmation of itself. The account offered here makes no such claim and permits none. If structural change is people deciding inside their positions with the materials at hand, then it has no destination, because choices have no destination; it goes wherever the positioned choosing takes it, which is not

knowable in advance and bends toward no foreordained end. The recognition is therefore not a programme and not a prophecy. It is the opposite of a prophecy: the refusal to believe that anything is being carried anywhere by any force, and the insistence that what looks like the movement of history is the sum of what people, situated as they are, decide to do.

III. The Hands Beneath the Tide

So the image the volume took its name from can be set down for what it always was. From far enough away, the spread of an arrangement across the world looks like osmosis — a form seeping through the membrane of borders and centuries, drawn by a gradient no one made, equalising toward some destined uniformity. Come close, and the membrane turns out to be made of decisions and the gradient of interests, and the seeping resolves into a thousand separate acts: a prince who saw that the break could be done and would pay, and made it; a founder who reached for the proven template because it was the established way to be a king; a hard-pressed ministry that copied the stronger state's design because copying what had worked was the path to survival; an excluded faction that took up a borrowed creed because the creed unlocked the door it was barred from. There was never a tide. There were only hands, reaching for tools that would do them good, declining where the tools would not — and the osmosis was the name we gave the pattern when we stood too far off to see that it was made, the whole of it, of people deciding. To see the hands beneath the tide is the recognition this volume has to offer, and the discipline it asks: that when some arrangement seems to sweep the world as if by a force of its own, one look not for the force, which is not there, but for the positioned people, who always are.

A Note on Sources

This volume verified its load-bearing specifics against the scholarship rather than asserting them from memory, and a reader who wishes to go further should go to the following.

On why functioning states are not overthrown from below but fall when they break at the top, Theda Skocpol’s States and Social Revolutions of 1979, which argues that the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions cannot be explained by ideology, class struggle, or revolutionary organisation alone, but by the coincidence of state breakdown — under international pressure and fiscal strain, with the ruling class divided — and mass mobilisation; hers is a structural rather than a voluntarist theory, in which revolutions are not willed but occur when the structures align. On the copying of successful models, Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell’s 1983 paper on institutional isomorphism, and their concept of mimetic isomorphism — imitation of peers perceived as successful or legitimate, under conditions of uncertainty, for legitimacy rather than demonstrated performance.

On the spread of the Reformation among the German princes, the histories of the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 and its principle cuius regio, eius religio — whose realm, his religion — under which converting princes gained control of their territories’ religion, reclaimed power from emperor and pope, and kept the church lands seized before 1552. On the refusal to treat ideas as free-floating units with lives of their own, the contextual intellectual history of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge school, and the materialist tradition after Marx that treated prevailing ideas as the superstructure of an arrangement of power rather than its engine. The framework and method are stated in this project’s companion papers — on position

logic, on the small contending apex, and on how durable orders are set in place and come to run themselves — each written, like this one, to stand alone.